



Southeast Fishery Bulletin

National Marine Fisheries Service, Southeast Regional Office, 263 13th Avenue South., St. Petersburg, Florida 33701

FOR INFORMATION CONTACT:

Ben Higgins: (409) 766-3670

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

June 22, 2005

NR05-032

NOAA'S National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) COMPLETES ANNUAL TURTLE EXCLUDER DEVICE TESTING – 180 Florida Loggerhead Sea Turtles Returned to the Wild

Scientists from NMFS' Panama City, Pascagoula, and Galveston Laboratories conducted their annual research into the effectiveness of turtle excluder devices (TEDs) from June 10 through June 17, 2005. The turtles used during the testing have been released into the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean.

A TED is a special component of a shrimp trawl that enables sea turtles to escape from shrimpers' nets while minimizing the loss of shrimp. Thousands of sea turtles drown each year in shrimp trawls before the use of TEDs became mandatory in 1989.

Every year since the mid-1980s, NMFS has tested new and existing turtle excluder device designs in Gulf of Mexico waters near Shell Island, about one mile southeast of Panama City Beach, Fla. During the testing, divers observe and videotape sea turtles' behavior to document how well they are able to escape from TED-equipped shrimp trawls. Scientists and managers use the data obtained from this important research to determine whether innovative TED designs can be approved for use throughout the shrimping industry.

A key to the reliability of the research is that it entails the use of live, captive-raised loggerhead sea turtles. Each year about 200 two-year-old loggerheads hatched in Florida and raised at NMFS' Sea Turtle Facility in Galveston, Texas, are returned to Florida for use in the testing. On average, the turtles are 18 inches long and weigh 15 pounds.

"The loggerheads used for TED testing are not harmed in any way and are returned to the wild at the completion of the study," said research fishery biologist Ben Higgins. "We've always done everything possible to prepare these turtles for their reintroduction into the wild. All evidence indicates that they become fully assimilated into the wild stocks and don't suffer any adverse effects from being raised in captivity or used in this research."

"When we complete the tests, we release the turtles in areas of the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean where wild turtles of the same size and maturity are found," continued Higgins. "Once released, the turtles begin seeking sources of food and may venture into passes and bays where crabs and other shellfish, the staple of their diet, are commonly found. This is natural behavior for young sea turtles and people should allow them to forage unmolested."

It is common for people to encounter sea turtles in areas that are popular recreational destinations like beaches, docks, and piers. However, it is a violation of the Endangered Species Act for people to take sea turtles. The term "take" means that it is illegal to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect sea turtles.